[why i'm catholic: sola scriptura is suspicious](https://www.kennethhensley.com/blog/why-im-catholic-sola-scriptura-is-suspicious)

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Imagine you're a new believer. You've heard about the life and teaching of Christ and responded to it. You attend a Bible study in a home where the foundational idea of Protestant Christianity is communicated to you: there's no authoritative Church on earth; Scripture is your "sole, sufficient, infallible rule of faith and practice", we're all just doing our best to understand what it teaches.

You begin to read your Bible. Discovering that it was originally written in Hebrew and Greek, you decide to become a little more serious and begin to consult critical commentaries written by biblical scholars who are interpreting the original texts. Very quickly you notice that even among those with advanced degrees in theology and biblical studies -- men and women who have sometimes spent decades bent over the Greek and Hebrew texts -- there are differences of opinion on just about everything!

You find there are substantial disagreements about the nature of the Church and how it's to be governed; about what Christ actually accomplished on the cross; about how salvation is applied; about whether it can be lost; about whether baptism and the Eucharist (and Confession) are ordained means of receiving the graces they depict or mere rites by which we proclaim and remember; about sanctification and whether it's even important that Christians strive for holiness.

You begin to look around and notice that Christianity is divided. There are Catholics and Eastern Orthodox and Anglicans and Lutherans and Presbyterians and Baptists and Methodists and Nazarenes and Pentecostals and the Church of Christ and Seventh Day Adventists and all sorts of independent churches led my independent teachers. And they're all telling you different things about what the Bible teaches on all these subjects and more..

In the face of this, what are your options?

Well, you could throw up your hands and say "who knows?" You could take the position that none of those issues matter. You could decide to simply accept whatever the church you happen to attend tells you. After all, that's where your friends and family are.

Or you could take seriously the idea that Scripture is your sole and *sufficient* rule of faith and practice, roll up your sleeves and begin a rigorous study of the Bible so that you might come to *personal conviction* as to what you believe.

This is what Martin Luther did. And of course this is something most Protestant ministers regularly encourage their people to do. It's common to hear them say things like, "Hey, I'm just a fallible human being. Don't believe it simply because I tell you it's so. Go home and study and decide for yourself!"

In fact, it's common for Protestant teachers to *insist* on this as the solemn duty of every Christian. In one debate, well-known Protestant apologist James White said,

Protestants believe that God will hold each man and woman accountable and responsible for his truth. You will not be able to say, “Well, such and such a person told me to believe that.” No, God will hold us accountable. We must apply our minds and hearts to be *diligent students* of the Word.

But whether or not one wants to put it in such strong terms ("God will hold each man and woman *accountable* for his truth") to one degree or another every serious Protestant lives with St. Paul's admonition to Timothy ringing in his ears: "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workmen who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth" (2 Tim. 2:15).

Every serious Protestant knows that she can't simply accept what her pastor or church or denomination is telling her. Instead, she must study Scripture and follow the truth where it leads.
                                                                         **Except...**How in the world could a Christian living in the second or third or fourth or ninth or fourteenth centuries have done this?  How could he have actually *practiced* *sola scriptura*? That's my question.

For one thing, there were no Bibles in the earliest centuries of Christianity. Certainly *some* of the churches would have had complete copies of all the books we have in our Old and New Testaments, but many would have had only portions. And as we've already seen, in the early centuries of the Church there wasn't even complete agreement as to which books should be included in Scripture.

So there was no "Bible" for decades and in many places much longer than that.

But it's worse than that.

Even if the canon of the Old and New Testaments had been firmly decided from the day the last apostle died, no individual Christian would have had access to a Bible he or she could actually study. No ambitious believer could have sat at his desk examining St Paul's Epistle to the Romans, compared it to Galatians and Ephesians and then compared that to what his bishop was saying.

No Christian could have been exercising his "right of private interpretation."

Because books had to be copied by hand, they were rare and extremely expensive. It wasn't until the invention of the printing press in the 15th century that books began to become widely available and at prices people could afford. Before that, Christians learned from the Church.

But it's worse than that.

Even if every Church had a Bible and every Christian as well -- even if Bibles had been printed in the millions and delivered to the doorsteps of every Christian home just like the phone book -- most could not have practiced *sola scriptura* for the simple reason that most could not read.

Again, it wasn't until the advent of printing that literacy began to expand in any significant way. Before that the "charmed circle of the literate", as Alister McGrath describes them, consisted mainly of the clergy and the wealthy who could afford to collect books.

But it's worse than that.

Even if every follower of Christ from the time of the apostles had his own Bible and could read, in order for believers to, as James White put it, "apply [their] minds and hearts to be diligent students of the Word”, these believers would need to know something of Greek and Hebrew and the science of biblical interpretation. At minimum they'd have to know how to use Greek and Hebrew lexicons and concordances and how to study the historical and cultural context of Scripture.

And no, I'm not kidding. It isn't easy to draw out the theology of the Old and New Testaments. If it were, there would not be so many sincerely held points of view. And every serious student of the Bible *knows* that you can't simply read whatever English translation you happen to have and assume that the meaning is clear -- especially when reading difficult and disputed passages. The fact is that translation *involves* interpretation, and in the process of translation there's no way to prevent theological biases of the translator from slipping in. His doctrinal point of view can be seen in the *choices* he makes when a word or phrase could be translated in more than one way.

Because of this, the serious study of Scripture requires that one at minimum have the ability to use scholarly resources. And of course this would have been virtually *impossible* for 99.9% of Christians living between the time of the Apostles and the printing press.

It's still impossible for most.
But it's even worse than that.

Because even if every Christian in history had a Bible and the resources available to study Scripture in the original languages and could read, the vast majority would not have had the natural ability or inclination or time to roll up their sleeves and figure out whether the Lutherans or Baptists or Presbyterians or Methodists or Anglicans are the "most right".

Most had little or no education and were raising children and working in the fields from sun-up to down-down. When exactly were they going to exegete the Epistle to the Hebrew?

My point: throughout all those centuries between the time of the apostles and the invention of the printing press, it would not have even been *possible* for Christians to study the Bible and come to their own conclusions about what it was teaching. During those many centuries, except in rare cases, Christians could *only* learn their doctrine from the Church.

Which of course was not conceived as a problem but rather as a good thing. Quoting St Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyon in the late-second century:

*When, therefore, we have such proofs, it is not necessary to seek among others the truth which is easily obtained from the Church.  For the Apostles, like a rich man in a bank, deposited with her most copiously everything which pertains to the truth; and everyone whoever wishes draws from her the drink of life.*

It was not until the advent of printing that the idea of Christians having Bibles and studying them and practicing the right of private judgment could have been conceived as anything other than nonsense.

Because of this, when Mr. White says that God will "hold each Christian accountable for His truth", that Christians will not be able to hide behind "But so and so told me to believe that", that we must all become "diligent students of the Word" -- well, he's clearly not speaking to those living between the time of the apostles and the mid-15th century. If he is, he might as well go on to encourage them to use the internet as an aid to their studies of the Greek and Hebrew testaments!

And because of this, I find it suspicious that it was only at a point in history when *sola scriptura* might possibly be put into practice that it began to be seriously advocated.

**Conclusion**
When Tina and I were coming into the Catholic Church, we had friends who were clearly interested. Some of them I believe would have wanted to explore the matter. But they had kids to raise and jobs to work and were busy with life and I could read their thoughts: *How in the world am I going to wrestle through all these issues? I can barely take care of things as it is.*

And I agree with them!

How *can* most Christians deal with all of competing views that exist *within* Christianity and "decide" who's right and who's wrong and what's what? Most don't have the time or ability or inclination to hack through the jungle of competing ideas. And why should they have to?

Does it even makes sense to think that this is what Jesus would leave us with?

Doesn't it make far more sense to think that the kind Church we see established and functioning in the New Testament is the kind of Church he would want to continue until he returns again? A Church that is able to speak with authority as it did in Acts 15 ("It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...") and again in determining the canon of Scripture?  A Church with the ability by the Spirit to guard and preserve and hand down and even draw out over time the implications of the apostolic deposit of faith?

Most Protestants can see the sense that this makes. What they cannot swallow is the idea that this Church I refer to is the Catholic Church.

And to this we turn next week.